

Charles Krauthammer

A Rash of Conspiracy Theories

When do we dig up Bill Casey?

Well, they dug up the bones of Zachary Taylor, 12th president of the United States, to prove that he did not die at the hand of God but at the hand of conspirators. Some historical novelist got it into her head that Old Rough and Ready was not the sort to die of gastroenteritis and that his death was just too convenient for the pro-slavery forces of the day. Finding arsenic in Taylor's earthly remains, it was held, would recast the Civil War as the product of a few unknown men who prevented the liberal Taylor, a man heretofore not known as a giant among presidents, from coping with the underlying causes of the Civil War.

Would that history were so neat. It isn't. And Zachary Taylor wasn't murdered. So the chief medical examiner of Kentucky informs us, 141 years after the fact. The trace amount of arsenic found in him was not enough to kill a mouse.

In fact, Taylor was likely killed by his doctors. Before the 20th century, doctors spent most of their time bleeding, blistering and feeding (what we now know to be) poisons to their already debilitated patients, a bizarre ritual that for centuries was known as medicine. That is what they did to Taylor when he came down with gastroenteritis after consuming iced cherries and milk on a steamy Fourth of July.

But there is no romance in being inadvertently killed by your doctors. And no satisfying sense of injustice at discovering death by natural causes. Hence the eternal quest for the satisfaction that comes from conspiracy uncovered. Taylor's indecorous disinterment is only the most bizarre example of the current quest for conspiracy. We are in the midst of a wave of conspiracy theorizing:

■ Former Carter aide Gary Sick claims that in 1980 the Reagan campaign conspired with the ayatollah to keep the hostages in Tehran past election day. Many Democrats believe that if Sick is

right, the 1980 election was stolen.

■ A best-seller, "Silent Coup: The Removal of a President," claims that Watergate was an elaborate conspiracy to dethrone an innocent Richard Nixon involving some of his own operatives (notably Alexander Haig and John Dean) working hand in glove with such improbable allies as Bob Woodward of *The Post*.

■ Two princes of Hollywood, Oscar winners Kevin Costner and Oliver Stone, are working on a big-screen version of the Kennedy assassination that reportedly paints a vast conspiracy involving the CIA, FBI, Pentagon, Dallas police, Secret Service, big business and Lyndon Johnson. They had to get Kennedy out of power before he could—if this is Stone, what else?—end the Vietnam War. Not only did Oswald not do it alone. He didn't do it at all. The movie

hero, played by Costner, is New Orleans district attorney Jim Garrison, who once did bring a conspiracy case to trial in Louisiana. It was dismissed by the jury in less than an hour.

What do all these conspiracy theories have in common? They delegitimize what appear to be constitutional transitions of power. They imply that Reagan, Johnson and even poor Millard Fillmore came to power, and Nixon was deprived of it, not by normal democratic process but by plot.

And now, as if to parody the trend, comes news that Louisiana authorities have decided to dig up the body of Huey Long's assassin. By studying its 60 (!) bullet holes (delivered, at the scene, by Long's bodyguards), they expect to find out if he really did it or if Long's bodyguards did. Remember, Long was vowing to challenge FDR for the presidency. Why is every man not a king? Forensic medicine will solve the mystery.

What is so odd about this rash of claims that various American presidential transitions were illegitimate is that America has produced the most durable and orderly system of transferring power in history. And yet ghosts keep appearing warning of murder most foul. Why is it that Americans are so ready to believe we transfer power like the Borgias, though with somewhat more guile?

The most reasonable explanation for this eruption of odd thinking is coincidence. This is always the safest and most likely explanation for any conjunction of curious circumstances, the periodic clustering of plane crashes, for example.

Not satisfied? If we are going to go beyond coincidence, then we must speak of underlying causes. In societies, as in individuals, paranoia arises when a world view has exploded and some new intellectual structure—preferably conspiratorial—is needed to fill the void and explain the world. Paranoia comes with disorienting cultural and ideological disintegration: Consider Germany at the collapse of Weimar and Iran at the fall of the shah.

Or America in the 1960s and 1970s, when, for example, Cambridge, Mass., sported a full-time outfit called the Assassination Information Bureau. Social convulsion would explain the rise of conspiracy theories then. But now? The '90s are hardly a time of cultural revolution. Bush's America is quiescent to the point of coma. Why the rash of conspiracy theories?

Why, conspiracy, of course. There are people who wish us ill. They must know that the quickest way to debilitate a society is to turn it paranoid. Has anyone checked the water? Was that really benzene in the Perrier?

Who are these shadowy characters? We can never be sure about these things. But my guess is the Medellín cartel. In conjunction with the Jews, of course. Orchestrated by Bill Casey. When do we dig him up?